

**HER MOTHER'S
TONGUE**

*Bilingual Dwelling,
Being In-Between, and
the Intergenerational
Co-creation of
Language-Worlds*

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Abstract

This article takes up the idea of language as a home and dwelling, and reconsiders what this might mean in the context of diasporic bilingualism, where as a “heritage speaker” of a minority language, the “mother tongue” may be experienced as both deeply familiar yet also alien or alienating. Drawing on a range of philosophical and literary accounts (Cassin, Arendt, Anzaldúa, Vuong, among others), this article explores how the so-called “mother tongue” is experienced by heritage speakers in an English-dominant world. From navigating one’s being in-between language-worlds, to the experience of language loss and efforts of reconnection, I argue that bilingual dwelling involves many complex layers often overlooked by philosophical accounts of language that do not attend to the lived world of the migrant and racialized outsider. By turning to the example of bilingual parenting, I then examine how such an undertaking, while labor-intensive, offers opportunities to refresh and co-create language-worlds anew.

Keywords: mother tongue, diaspora, bilingualism, language, home

But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out?

—*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, OCEAN VUONG

Introduction: Slippages of the Tongue

A curious phenomenon took hold in the first year my daughter was born; as I settled into my newfound role and identity as mother to a baby-becoming-toddler, and fell into a new rhythm of life shrouded in a thick fog of sleep deprivation and exhaustion, I became increasingly aware of a subtle but steady slippage in my grasp of the English language. It was a slippage of sorts. Words would spill out of my mouth not quite fully formed, racing out and off my tongue, eliding whatever mental gatekeepers were usually in place to run their cursory checks. Phrases—idiomatic phrases in particular—came out always slightly askew (“It was spick and speck,” “I hit the floor running”), and sentences, started with the best of intentions, would struggle to find their endings. Language was—and still mostly is, four years on¹—reduced to more utilitarian ends, my tongue and brain opting always for the most direct, literal, and colorless combination of words to convey what needed to be conveyed (or any attempt at linguistic flourish would require considerably more effort, time, revision, and verification). As an academic—one in the throes of completing a book manuscript at the time—this slippage was more than a little inconvenient, and not one reducible to what is colloquially called “baby brain.” Studies, of course, attest to the significant mental changes that pregnant women and new mothers² undergo, and its impact on cognitive processes and executive functioning³ But I was also parenting my daughter almost exclusively in Cantonese, which represented a significant shift in my everyday linguistic life, and, I was beginning to discern, a broader shift in my lived environment, relationships, and sense of place in the world. Language—meaning here, the English language—started to lose its fluidity; slippages of the tongue increasingly forced a gap between language and thought, or at least language and intention. If speech is the accomplishment of thought as Merleau-Ponty once described,⁴ then my thoughts went frequently unaccomplished, unfinished, incompletely and imperfectly articulated. But unlike my experience

of learning a foreign language in immersion settings, this emerging experience of parenting in Cantonese prompted a different set of reflections on the complicated affects and tensions that bilingual heritage speakers navigate in an English-dominant world.

English was not my first language—it is not my “mother tongue”⁵—but it is my dominant one. And as is the case for many second-generation refugees and migrants in Australia, it is the language in which I work, think, dream, and grow some of my most meaningful relationships. It is the language in which I am at my most lyrical. But it is also the language that, during this early period of bilingual parenting, buckled under the weight of disorientation. Nor was Cantonese, however—a branch of Chinese spoken in the country’s southeast region and by large diasporas around the world⁶—my “mother tongue,” although it is the language I identify most strongly as my home or cultural language, and the language I most commonly use in familial and community settings. My “mother tongue”—in the sense of “first” language—was probably Hokkien or Teochew, both lesser-known branches of Chinese. *My mother’s tongue*—that is, her dominant tongue—is different again: Vietnamese. This is the shared language of my parents, their preferred and habitual (although not only) language of communication. It is a language that, despite feeling foreign in my mouth, feels familiar in my ears, recalling moments of vulnerability and sickness as a child, or the lively chatter at family and community gatherings. But as refugees to a new land where many of the local refugee families spoke Cantonese, this is the shape and sound that survival took, and so they adapted. My daughter’s entry into Cantonese, then, is one mediated by the twists and turns that family genealogy and geopolitical history have dealt out. We speak it imperfectly, my daughter and I—and come to think of it, my mother too—but it is what we speak.

This article explores some of the tensions and challenges that arise from the broad experience of bilingualism among heritage speakers,⁷ as well as the experience of bilingual parenting in an English-dominant society. While critical philosophers of race have attended to various facets of the social and inner lives of racialized and migrant minorities in white settler colonial societies, theorizing their encounters of the body,⁸ of homemaking and travel,⁹ of temporality and time,¹⁰ this article will consider the underexplored experience of language and intergenerational

bilingualism. And while recent work turns to language brokering in migrant communities in order to tease out their moral implications,¹¹ in this article I am interested in exploring what this experience of bilingual in-betweenness *feels like*, phenomenologically. My aims here are twofold: First, I aim to show how linguistic liminality both challenges and extends philosophical conceptions of language as a kind of home. While generative as a starting point, I argue that such conceptions do not stretch far enough to account for the profound experience of linguistic alienation for racialized migrants and heritage speakers. Second, I aim to illuminate the rich, sometimes joyful and sometimes painful, complexity that marks the heritage speaker's experience of bilingualism and bilingual parenting—a complexity that is not only ethnographically interesting, but, given the conceptual framework of language as home, philosophically significant. In section 1, I map out a loose philosophical trajectory that conceptualizes language and the “mother tongue” as a kind of home. This sets the scene for thinking through the different ways bilingualism for the heritage speaker entails a more conflicted sense of dwelling and being at home in the world. Drawing on a range of philosophical and literary accounts, I then explore some of the underacknowledged dimensions of navigating bilingualism and bilingual parenting in a monolingual world, including its lived sense of being in-between and the experience of language loss (section 2), as well as its invisible labor, which is deeply racialized and gendered (section 3). Finally, in section 4 I consider how efforts of bilingual parenting, which in their own way pay homage to the painful histories of racism, migration, and displacement, can serve as a kind of reclamation of language in the face of its alienation, loss, and liminality. In doing so, I argue that bilingual parenting, usually taken to be a unidirectional enterprise, is better understood as a shared intergenerational co-creation of language-worlds.

1. The “Mother Tongue”: Language as Home and Dwelling

What do we mean by the “mother tongue”? In our everyday usage, the “mother tongue” designates the language into which we are born and/or, for the most part, raised. For this reason, it is also the language we often take to be our most intimate; evoking the cultural weight of the mother figure and the activity of mothering, the “mother tongue” concerns not

only our linguistic origins but speaks to the nurturing and unfolding of our very being. It is, in this sense, of broad ontological significance.¹² However as with the figure of the mother, these evocations of the “mother tongue” as primary (both in the sense of “first” and “singular”¹³), as nurturing, instinctive, and natural—all stand to be unpacked, denaturalized, and demythologized.¹⁴

Philosopher and philologist Barbara Cassin writes of the “mother tongue” (acknowledging that we can have several), that it is “the one that will accompany us our whole life . . . the one in which we dream.” And more strikingly still:

The maternal language is the one in which we are steeped, we bathe in its sonorities and we can play with it, make puns, hear significant echoes, invent: we are master of this language and yet it is the one that has a hold on us. It’s an extraordinary relationship. We are master because we can say what we want in it, but it has a hold on us because it determines our manner of thinking, our manner of living, our manner of being.¹⁵

Cassin’s rendering of the mother tongue as that through which we constitute our world, and at the same time, that through which we are constituted, echoes the special significance attributed to it by Hannah Arendt in a televised interview with Günter Gaus in 1964. When asked whether she, a German Jew now exiled to America, missed anything of pre-Hitler Europe, Arendt answers that she did not—that there was nothing left for her there, save for her mother tongue: “What remains?” she famously asks, answering, “Language remains.” She continues:

I have always consciously refused to lose my mother tongue [*die Muttersprache*] . . . I write in English, but I have never lost a feeling of distance from it. There is a tremendous difference between your mother tongue and another language. For myself I can put it extremely simply: In German I know a rather large part of German poetry by heart; the poems are always somehow in the back of my mind. I can never do that again. . . . [In] general I have maintained a certain distance (with English). The German language is the essential thing that has remained and that I have always consciously preserved.¹⁶

Common to both Cassin and Arendt's conceptions of the mother tongue is not only its perdurance in and through the varied and sometimes traumatic turns of one's life, but also the intensity and intimacy of the relationship with one's maternal language, and the sense of wholeness of being that it affords. For Arendt in particular, it is a relationship for which there is no replacement, no substitution, no parallel—despite even the unthinkable horrors committed in and through her mother tongue during her lifetime:

What is one to do? It wasn't the German language that went crazy. And, second, there is no substitution for the mother tongue. People can forget their mother tongue. That's true—I have seen it. There are people who speak the new language better than I do. I still speak with a very heavy accent, and I often speak unidiomatically. They can all do these things correctly. But they do them in a language in which one cliché chases another because the productivity that one has in one's own language is cut off when one forgets that language.¹⁷

For Arendt, the irreplaceability of one's mother tongue derives from its grounding and originary status. We may move on from our maternal language, and learn to live, work, and perhaps even dream in another tongue, but this linguistic intimacy and immediacy is something we never, according to her, fully retrieve or recover. In this sense, the "mother tongue" for Arendt serves as a kind of home; as the place from whence we emerge into the world, and a place to which we—in our innermost moments—return.¹⁸ It is what remains most familiar. It is what remains. And yet, this rendering of the "mother tongue" as a home does not therefore place it outside the realm of public—or, more pointedly, political—life. On the contrary, as Jennifer Gaffney has argued in her reading of Arendt, the "mother tongue" as "home" supplies us with *the very condition* for engaging the political; far from affording withdrawal from a world shattered by totalitarianism, the "absolute familiarity" of the maternal language is instead what provides us "a ground from which to rebuild [it]."¹⁹

Drawing a stronger connection between language and home still, Martin Heidegger famously wrote in his 1946 Letter on Humanism: "*Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells.*"²⁰ While Heidegger has in mind here language in general—and not any one language or

the maternal language in particular—his account nonetheless shares with Arendt’s the invocation of the home in trying to understand the unique significance and power of language to human beings. Writing later in 1957/58, Heidegger notes how we are “within language and with language before all else.”²¹ (David Krell’s alternate translation, “we are within language, *at home in language*, prior to everything else” [my emphasis], introduces a reference to “home” that is not present in the original German.) Though we might always already be immersed in it, that is not to say that we are always attentive to it—or that we relate to language *qua* language. Heidegger’s essay therefore seeks out ways we can become more attuned to its true nature. For him, language is fundamentally misconceived if approached as something that hinges on human action or activity—if like Humboldt, we understand language as something that we humans enact or “do.” If anything, *language does us*; it has its own being, its own life force. “Language speaks,” Heidegger writes—more suggestively formulated in the original German as “*Die Sprache spricht*.” Moreover, what language does in its speaking is a kind of world-revealing: “Language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself.”²² It is in this sense that language can be the house of B/being for Heidegger, since language heralds the possibility of our world-having, and it is what gives us humans a world,²³ which is more than saying that language gives us a “world-view.”²⁴ There are controversial implications for such a claim, namely, whether it follows that non-linguistic humans or nonhuman animals are therefore “world poor” (contra Heidegger, I do not think this is the case),²⁵ but one appeal of Heidegger’s account is the power that it accords to language as more than a vehicle of human expression.²⁶

Of course, Heidegger is not alone in seeking to rethink language along these lines, inverting the conventional relationship between speaker and language (*der Sprecher* and *die Sprache*). Maurice Merleau-Ponty similarly sought to accord language with a sense of its own vitality, writing, “Language is much more like a sort of being than a means.”²⁷ In his view, language is not simply a means through which ideas or meanings are passed through, a communicative medium, but instead possesses a movement and force of its own. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of language are typically active, verging on agential, writing that language “snaps [the child] up like a whirlwind,”²⁸ or how for those who are learning, language “precedes itself, teaches itself, and suggests its own deciphering,” indeed this being “the marvel which defines language.”²⁹ This is a view Jacques

Derrida extends, not only agreeing that language “would have always preceded me,”³⁰ but also in his iconic refrain throughout *Monolingualism of the Other*: “I only have one language; it is not mine.”³¹ In an interview toward the end of his life, Derrida elaborates: “I have only one language, and, at the same time . . . this language does not belong to me. . . . a language is not something that belongs.”³² The idea that language does not belong to us, but that *we instead belong to it*, is one that animates Cassin’s own reflections on the mother tongue:

“Not something that belongs” also means that, when you speak a language, you are the one that belongs to it as much as it belongs to you. . . . You are not the one who possesses it because it is the one that obligates and makes you. It doesn’t belong to you: you belong to it and it belongs to people other than you. That is what a maternal language is.³³

We glean from these various accounts a broadly shared move to understand language in terms that invert the implied activity and order of things when we utter the simple phrase, “I speak this language.” Two threads in particular stand out: First, it is not so much “I” who does the speaking, but rather language. Language speaks: it precedes, it brings, it teaches, it whisks us up in its music. And second, in doing so, it houses us; it affords us a dwelling, a home, a world, a place to inhabit, be, and belong.

These broad reflections, from Arendt through to Cassin, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida,³⁴ while rich and insightful, concern language in a general sense. Although set against the backdrop of specific languages and geopolitical contexts (German in the case of Arendt’s exile from Germany, French in the case of Derrida’s upbringing in French Algeria), they do not explicitly or systematically take up the phenomenon of inhabiting *languages* in their plurality and particularity. As a result, there are certain unvoiced questions and perspectives, which I would like to explore here. For example, what does it mean when we dwell in language—and languages—imperfectly? When we dwell in their margins, or their in-between? When language both does and doesn’t offer that clearing-concealing? Or what about when we lose language? When language doesn’t feel like a house—or at least, not *your* house? What about when language doesn’t speak?

2. Living Language, Losing Language

But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level.

As a girl, you watched from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again. Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan.

—*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, OCEAN VUONG

The diasporic condition—particularly when borne of tumultuous circumstances of war, persecution, poverty, or political upheaval—highlights the complicated and sometimes fractious relationships we can have with language, and especially with the so-called “mother tongue.” This is particularly true for second and subsequent generations, whose ties to language, culture, and heritage can become more fragile still, even as these sometimes-strained ties can centrally configure one’s social identity. Bilingualism in this context, especially for heritage speakers, moves us beyond the usual descriptions of the “mother tongue” as affording intimacy or a sense of wholeness, and beyond a description like Derrida’s when he writes that language “constitutes me” (1998, 1). Sometimes, as the dominant language of one’s country eclipses the primacy of the maternal language, the “mother tongue” becomes instead a site of disconnection, of loss, or in Ocean Vuong’s words, “itself a void.” If language offers us a home or dwelling, then perhaps the lived experience of diasporic bilingualism speaks to a kind of being-in-between (Lugones, Ortega), a being-neither-here-nor-there (Anzaldúa), or a being-multiplicitous (Ortega), along the lines elaborated in the tradition of Latinx feminist thinkers.

Like some of the authors considered so far, Chicana feminist and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa similarly connects language with a sense of home or homeliness: “For some of us (Chicanas), language is a homeland closer than the Southwest” (1987, 55). And yet Anzaldúa also goes further by explicitly drawing on the experience of living in, through, and between multiple languages. In her iconic chapter, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Anzaldúa

explores what it means to speak, censor, switch, modulate, tame, shame, and yet despite all that, *still insist on* one's tongue. "*Nosotros los Chicanos* straddle the borderlands," she writes (1987, 62) in a deliberate and performative switching between tongues (as she does throughout the book). As Anzaldúa explores, straddling the linguistic borderlands entails a rich tapestry of skills, affects, and labor that is at once creative, joyous, and inventive, while also painful and defiant. To be Chicana, for Anzaldúa, is to find oneself in-between languages and language worlds—between Castillian Spanish, standard English, working-class English, Chicano Spanish, *Caló* and more (1987, 55)—and thus always facing the imperative to switch, translate, adapt, and create. To make oneself legible within these worlds requires an unending labor. But more than this, to be Chicana, for Anzaldúa, is also to internalize "the belief that we speak poor Spanish . . . [an] illegitimate . . . bastard language" (1987, 58), and to navigate a shame and alienation that flow from that. Sometimes this shame turns inward; to learn from childhood that one's "language is wrong" manifests in low self-worth, diminishing one's sense of self. But so too can it turn outward, tainting one's experience of community; Anzaldúa writes of how "Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation," which she ultimately realizes is because "to be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there" (1987, 58).

These fraught experiences of language are further compounded—indeed, underscored—by the tension of existing on the periphery of an English-dominant society, while also dwelling in the complexity of one's "mother tongue" (which, like our relationships with mothers, can be a lot messier than the candied images we get in commercials and social media feeds). To exist on the periphery of a dominant language is to exist peripherally, or to risk not existing at all:

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie.*

Pero basta cuando no lo soy, lo soy. [Sometimes I am nothing or nobody. But as soon as I am not, I am.] (Anzaldúa 1987, 63; my translation³⁵)

Far from the wholeness of self that one might feel in their maternal language described in section 1, or the sense of home and refuge one might find in it, straddling the borderlands of language-worlds can,³⁶ in Anzaldúa's account, feel like a cancelling out, a nullification. Not only is the tongue a void—as in Vuong's epigraph to this article—but along with it, a sense of self. For Anzaldúa, to live in the borderlands is to live this contradiction, to find a way of being in and through this nonbeing.

Important to note here is that the sense of being no one pertains not only to one's linguistic experience, but it is also inherently bound with the experience of racialized and migrant marginalization. Novelist Zadie Smith notes as much in her description of the Black immigrant-outsider in *White Teeth*, writing:

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*.³⁷

The bilingualism Anzaldúa speaks of is, of course, a racialized one. This is because languages themselves are racialized; they participate in the economy of racial hierarchy and can be vehicles through which those hierarchies are sustained and maintained.³⁸ As Lori Gallegos has argued, "Language is one of the sites through which social hierarchies are revealed and reinforced. It is a site where cultures undergo marginalization or erasure."³⁹ Indeed, the racialized erasure of cultures and languages in settler colonial societies provides the critical frame through which to understand the specific experience of living between languages and of language loss explored here, not to mention a critical difference from a more generalized experience of bilingualism. While bilinguals of all stripes might share in experiences of switching, translation, and straddling language-worlds, these are not experienced in the same way as for the colonized or racialized subject. Not only are languages differentially valued along racialized lines (consider the traditional "prestige" accorded to French, German, Latin),⁴⁰ but so too are their speakers—whereas the bilingualism of whites is often taken as a sign of one's status as educated, "cultured," and open-minded,

the bilingualism of non-whites is often viewed as suspicious, antisocial, and a sign of poor societal integration.⁴¹ And following Smith's observation above, if dissolution and disappearance loom always near for the racialized immigrant, then language is one site where this is felt most keenly—for what is the demand for linguistic assimilation (“Hey! Speak English!”) if not a simultaneous demand for the mother tongue's dissolution, its disappearance? This is why for Anzaldúa, the question of language is one that runs deeper than the tongue: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (1987, 59). But note that what Anzaldúa names here is not just a personal expression of pride; in a climate of white supremacy, where, as she notes, one pays a price for not acculturating, such pride in language is also, necessarily, a political one.

While Anzaldúa's account describes the complex reality of living through and between languages in a white, English-dominant society, another commonly shared phenomenon among diasporic bilinguals is the experience of language's loss. Sometimes the lived experience of the “mother tongue” in a migrant or diasporic context is marked not with intimacy or playfulness,⁴² or even a sense of negotiation and being-between, but rather with a sense of loss and mourning. Sometimes, to live in one's mother tongue is to constantly run up against the limit of one's language, to feel its shape fade with each passing year, as ties to family and cultural communities grow more distant, or as one settles further into the dominant language of one's surroundings. In a personal essay for the *New Yorker*, writer Jenny Liao explores her journey of loss and repair with her first tongue, Cantonese. She writes:

No one prepared me for the heartbreak of losing my first language. It doesn't feel like a sudden, sharp pain of losing someone you love, but rather a dull ache that builds slowly until it becomes a part of you. (Liao 2021)

Liao describes the gradual process of her language loss, from growing up as a primarily Cantonese-speaking child of Chinese immigrants in South Brooklyn, immersed in a world of Asian grocery stores, *yum cha*, and Cantopop (growing up, as I did, in its golden age) to becoming a young professional living out on her own, whose slipping grasp of Cantonese is at first marked by innocuous mix-ups of right (右, *jau6*) and left

(左, *zou2*), green (綠, *luk6*) and blue (藍, *laam4*), but eventually progressing to the point where she speaks Cantonese “infrequently” and understands it “rarely.” The loss is not only—or, not in the main—a linguistic one but one that unravels and refigures both her intimate relationships and her sense of personal identity:

During my visits back home from California, our time together is quiet, our conversations brief. My parents ask about my life in Cantonese over plates of *siu yuk* and *choy sum* while I clumsily piece together incomplete sentences peppered with English in response. I have so much to say, but the Cantonese words are just out of reach, my tongue unable to retrieve them after being neglected in favor of English for so long. I feel emptier with each visit, like I’m losing not only my connection to my parents but also fragments of my Chinese heritage. Can I call myself Chinese if I barely speak the language? (Liao 2021)

For Liao, Cantonese has now become something marked by distance, clumsiness, strain, and effort. Whereas her proficiency was once a source of schoolyard shame (“ching chong . . . Do you know that’s what you sound like?”), its erosion has now become the source of a different, more self-originating and self-directed, shame:

It’s deeply disorienting to have thoughts that I so eagerly want to share with my parents but which are impossible to express. Cantonese no longer feels natural, and sometimes even feels ridiculous, for me to speak. (Liao 2021)

And its overcoming takes a deliberate, persistent effort: in order to communicate with her parents in more than superficial matters, Liao must now consult translation apps, online dictionaries,⁴³ Chinese American peers, and she makes a point of practicing with Cantonese-speaking waiters and cashiers at every opportunity. Though cumbersome, it’s an effort that Liao actively undertakes.

Liao’s story is in many ways emblematic of the journey many migrant families and communities experience upon making new homes in new lands, particularly in settler colonial societies like the United States. Hers bears out the direct cost of “fitting in,” of linguistically assimilating

to a society hostile to the sounds of other tongues, the smell of other foods, the sight of other customs—until of course, they become fashionably appropriated or commodified. Liao’s story recounts the painful cost of seeking economic and social success (or just security) in a society suspicious of migrants who don’t leave enough of their cultures and old selves behind. Along with many non-white, working-class migrants, Liao’s parents put their faith in their children’s mastery of English to secure their economic future: “This missing piece in my parents’ lives would propel me forward for the rest of mine,” she writes (2021). The experience of language loss Liao describes is different from the experience of switching and negotiation Anzaldúa speaks of, and yet both accounts still land on themes of estrangement and alienation to describe their relationship to their “mother tongues” in white, English-monolingual society. Similarly, Bengali American novelist Jhumpa Lahiri (in a book written in her recently acquired Italian), also invokes the motifs of alienation and exile when describing her relationship to Bengali:

In a sense I’m used to a kind of linguistic exile. My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you.⁴⁴

And like Liao, as well as many other minority language heritage speakers, Lahiri’s sense of disjuncture unfolds not only at the level of alienation from an English-dominant society (which in some ways actually becomes more linguistically intimate), but rather a more internally felt alienation, an alienation from the “mother tongue” itself:

In my case there is another distance, another schism. I don’t know Bengali perfectly. I don’t know how to read it, or even write it. I have an accent, I speak without authority, and so I’ve always perceived a disjunction between it and me. As a result I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too.⁴⁵

Through such reflections, we encounter a different picture of language; not as enabler of thought, expression, or world-having as explored

in section 1, but of language at its limits, of language when it appears to fail. Writer Ocean Vuong explores the question of language's failure evocatively and provocatively in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a novel fashioned in the form of a letter to the author's Vietnamese mother, who is neither literate nor lingual in English. The book opens:

Let me begin again.

Dear Ma,

I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.⁴⁶

Reflecting on his motivation behind the book in an interview, Vuong elaborates:

[The book] was an attempt to see if language can really be a bridge as it is often aspired to be. And ultimately that it could fail . . . that was exhilarating to me. To be a writer endeavouring in a work, an essay, that should fail from the get go. Writing a letter—in English—to an illiterate mother, it's an impossibility."⁴⁷

Whether and in what sense this amounts to a “failure” is a question for further and fuller consideration (which I do not undertake here).⁴⁸ Viewed as a means of communication, “a bridge” in Vuong’s words, language in this sense seems always to hold open the possibility of failure. But as noted earlier, language is much more than this. Language offers us a dwelling; it inhabits us,⁴⁹ it houses (our) Being,⁵⁰ it is the condition of our home-making in the world and perhaps even our world-having. Language is not just socially and culturally important but ontologically too. However, even on this more expansive account of language, the question of failure still lingers close by. As autobiographical accounts such Liao’s, Lahiri’s, and Vuong’s testify, there is a fracturing that can take place in language, particularly with the maternal language. It is not just that Cantonese ceases to “belong” to Liao, no longer feeling right in her mouth, on her tongue, in the back of her throat—it is that this parting of tongues leads her to wonder if *she* no longer belongs to *it*: “Can I call myself Chinese if I barely speak the language?” (Liao 2021). Lahiri’s account of exile and disjuncture from Bengali expresses a similar kind of alienation. Far from belonging to our first language, as Cassin writes of the maternal language, these accounts

paint a more complicated picture of estrangement and nonbelonging. Sometimes, the mother tongue does not afford us the home or dwelling we think—or maybe hope—it might.

3. Language's Labor: Mothering in Tongues

你想講乜嘢? (*nei5 soeng2 gong2 mat1 je5?* What do you want to say?)

啊, 你肚餓呀? (*aa1, nei5 tou5 ngo6 aa4?* Oh, you're hungry?)

我哋一齊用廣東話嚟講啦: “我肚餓 . . . ” (*ngo5 dei2 jat1 cai1 jung6 gwong2 dung1 waa6 lai4 gong2 laa1? “ngo5 tou5 ngo6 . . . ”* Let's say it together in Cantonese: “I'm hungry . . . ”)⁵¹

I have become a sort of third wheel in my own mother-daughter relationship. Our conversations proceed in triplicate. I envy the ease and fluidity of her linguistic relationship with her English-monolingual father; theirs is a relationship where language serves to express, communicate, and play—language is rarely thematized, or only playfully so, through word games and the like. My linguistic relationship with my daughter lacks that being-in-the-moment; it is communicative, to be sure, and playful too—but it is also underwritten with a project to teach and impart language (and with it, cultural and family histories), as well as a steady if unvoiced encouragement to stick with it, stay with me, keep at this, darling.

Although little discussed in most philosophical accounts of language, what the lived experiences of bilingualism and language's loss show us is that language and its maintenance (and/or recovery) can demand a certain labor. This labor can take many different forms and span different scales, ranging from collective action to intimate personal reorientations. On a community scale, organizations like the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) show the variety and extent of community initiative and support required for the task of language revitalization, where language loss is not just a result of personal migratory circumstances but a deliberate and integrated part of the British colonial project. As Tonya Stebbins et al. have argued, in settler-colonial contexts like Australia, where from over 250 Indigenous languages only 13 were considered as still going strong

in 2014, language serves as an “important . . . site potential of resistance,” and language revitalization projects thus play a critical role in efforts of decolonial reclamation,⁵² even if some have problematized the usual framing of such projects.⁵³ In this section, I examine the kinds of labor undertaken on a more personal level in migrant experiences of bilingualism and language loss, and how this is both refracted and intensified through the experience of bilingual parenting (particularly mothering), which, I argue, presents a unique but underexplored window into the labor of language.

As gleaned earlier, to negotiate different language-worlds, weaving within and between them, can be mentally, emotionally, psychologically, socially, and existentially taxing. In the case of language’s loss, there is a certain labor in trying to reacquaint oneself with it; to rediscover its music, to find its fluidity, to fill the void left of a tongue cut out. These efforts take on a different shape again when paired with the attempt to parent bilingually. Bengali-British columnist Sheela Banerjee gives a vivid account of what bilingual parenting in her mixed-race household looks like, including not only the messiness of moving between different languages and grammatical structures but also the mental load and anxiety conjured by even the most mundane of interactions:

I wonder almost every day why I am doing this. I speak to my daughter constantly in Bengali and she answers me in English. She and her dad speak in English. Family meals are utterly disjointed: he speaks in English, I chip in with Bengali, which is not as easy as it sounds, with my brain often struggling as no one is speaking the same language as me. Conversations that should flow are interrupted by split-second linguistic contortions in my head. We speak in word patterns, each responding to and mimicking one another. But when you are having a conversation with two grammatical structures, the pattern falls apart. Here is an example: “Mummy, can I have a piece of toast?”

I respond with the equivalent of:

“Immediately feed will do, now toast eat not.” (*Ek khuni khethay dobo, ekhon toast khash na.*)

Every now and then my husband makes an attempt to join in, but he has managed to learn only a few scraps of sentences, and he mentally switches off when I am speaking to my daughter. So I often end up in a kind of silent limbo, fretting subconsciously about whether this is a good idea.⁵⁴

In her reading and elaboration of Latinx feminist phenomenology, Mariana Ortega notes that the accounts of being-in-between, being-multiple, and liminality explored by thinkers such as Anzaldúa and María Lugones are collectively marked by a distinct lack of being at-ease (Ortega 2016, 59). Ortega writes: “the selves described by Latina feminist phenomenologists do not find themselves ‘in-the-world’ with the ease that traditional existential phenomenologists describe” (2016, 61). Banerjee’s account above, although on a microcosm, goes some way to illustrate what that lack of ease can look like in the context of bilingual parenting. Her brain becomes disoriented, flitting between languages and their grammatical structures, finding neither a home here nor there to land, the result being a linguistic mishmash that does not fit neatly either in Bengali or in English. Language and its limits become foregrounded in a way that counters the “readiness-to-hand” (*zuhandenheit*) that Heidegger attributes to *dasein*, immersed in the world and its projects (Heidegger 1962, 98; Ortega 2016, 62). Moreover, there is a distinct sense of alienation and anxiety that colors Banerjee’s experience; among the intimate setting of her family, Banerjee is isolated in her mostly internal language-gymnastics, removed from the immediacy and fluidity of mealtime chatter, left alone fretting over her parenting decisions.

The bilingual’s inhabiting of different language-worlds, an inhabiting that often takes place *simultaneously*, speaks not only to a being in-between alluded to in Anzaldúa’s account,⁵⁵ and more strongly suggested in Lugones’s account of “world”-traveling, but also something more. In Banerjee’s vignette above, I think what we see more closely resembles Ortega’s account of the multiplicitous self, who is both one and multiple, and who can be in many worlds *at the same time as* being in-between them, all while being aware of their own liminality.⁵⁶ Here Ortega extends a thread found in Anzaldúa’s account of the new mestiza’s “living in a lot of worlds, some of which overlap. *One is immersed in all the worlds at the same time while also traversing* from one to the other.”⁵⁷ There is a simultaneity of being-in-worlds that I think is important to emphasize in the case of the bilingual—and especially in the case of the bilingual parent—in a mixed-language environment. Rather than moving back and forth *between* worlds, I argue that bilingualism and bilingual parenting often entails a simultaneity that can be more suggestive of a *stacking of worlds*, where language-worlds are not always lived as discreet and disconnected but rather piled atop one another,⁵⁸ coexisting in the bilingual speaker, pressing against, impinging on, protruding and intruding into one another. With the stacking of

language-worlds, in contrast to moving *between* them, there is a sense of spatial collapse, of a contemporaneous being-in-worlds that at times can leave little leeway or room for reprieve. The common bilingual phenomenon of code-switching, where words from one language are substituted into the speech in another, might serve as one expression of this.⁵⁹ But a stronger example still would be that of cross-linguistic transfer, where the syntactical structure of one language is used in (transferred to) the context of another, signalling a contemporaneity of dwelling in language-worlds.⁶⁰ While perhaps interesting as linguistic phenomena, what these also point to is the complexity of sense-making, disentangling, and coexisting that bilinguals—both parents and children—quietly navigate.

Of course, the labor of language is often more overt than this. Migrant communities, particularly refugees and those who migrate under difficult economic and political conditions, face an inordinate task in setting up new lives and homes. This often involves the labor of learning the language of one's new surrounds, a task not always possible depending on one's background education and literacy, economic, employment, and health situation, caring obligations, not to mention access to language learning resources. Liao's parents' limited English (along with her own adolescent shame and frustration with it) is reflective of many migrants' experiences with the dominant language in a new country:

Upon meeting other Chinese American students who spoke English at home with their parents, I became furious that my parents weren't bilingual, too. If they valued English so much and knew how necessary it was in this country, why didn't they do whatever it took to learn it? "Mommy and Baba had to start working. We had no money. We had no time. We needed to raise you and your brothers." All I heard were excuses. (Liao 2021)

But within this narrative of "failure" to develop English-language proficiency—a periodically popular narrative in public discourse, particularly during times of political panic around immigration intake levels⁶¹—is a missed recognition of the linguistic labor that *does* take place among migrant communities. The linguistic agility of migrants, adapting their tongues (and ears) as a means of social network building and survival in their local communities—even if that is not, in the main, an adaption to English—is often passed over in the assessment of the migrant's efforts.⁶² This is in addition to the acquisition of whatever survival-level English is needed to

navigate employment, housing, education, access to social, health, financial, and legal services in one's new environs. What is also often missed is that limited proficiency in any language generates its own catalog of work; there is an additional, often invisible, layer of labor required to navigate social institutions and transactions in a world unready or unwilling to meet one's English halfway. After witnessing his mother and grandmother humiliated at the local butcher's when attempting to buy some oxtail for a hearty *bún bò Huế*, the young protagonist in Vuong's novel, *Little Dog*, writes:

That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours. (Vuong 2019b, 31–32)

As in Vuong's rendering, this labor is often intergenerational; common is the migrant kid who plays interpreter for their parents and elders at shops, doctors' offices, insurance company headquarters, parent-teacher interviews, on the phone to social welfare agencies, and so on.⁶³ Moreover, this labor is almost always one-sided; public institutions are rarely sufficiently equipped, resourced, or inclined to meet migrants halfway,⁶⁴ just as migrants must make efforts to retrain their ears and tongues to the local speech, but locals rarely learn to attune their ears to the accents and intonations of migrant English.⁶⁵

Language's labor takes on a different shape again in the case of bilingual parenting, and here I mean both where parenting takes place in a non-dominant language, and where the parent themselves is bilingual (for example, Banerjee's situation). For a diasporic or heritage speaker, bilingual parenting takes off on already unsteady linguistic ground, often with a mixture of linguistic in-betweenness and language loss coloring the parent's relationship to their own "mother tongue." Parenting in and through this context—and furthermore, in an environment that is by design resistant to the languages of marginalized groups⁶⁶—can therefore entail a constant stream of work. This can include an unending seeking out of resources (books, songs, and TV shows in language; finding local playgroups, child-care services, or schools) to support the primary activity of parenting in language, itself an endeavor replete with constant effort, repetition, and

reinforcement. It is unsurprising, then, that of those who eventually stop parenting bilingually, that the most common reason cited is that it became too much work, too difficult to sustain.⁶⁷

Moreover, this work is very often gendered. In her book, *Linguistic Intermarriage in Australia: Between Pride and Shame*, Hanna Torsh relays findings from interviews with thirty bilingual heterosexual parent couples, where clear gendered patterns emerged:

When it came to talking about whose job it was there was a clear difference in the way that ESB [English-Speaking Background] women and ESB men talked about the development of their children's language skills. The ESB husbands talked about their role largely as secondary to the mother, who is constructed as the primary decision-maker regarding bilingual childrearing. Thus the fathers' role was supporting, helping or allowing the development of bilingualism in their children or in simply supporting their partner's decision regarding bilingual childrearing. (Torsh 2020, 101–2)

Perhaps surprisingly, this gendered expectation and division of labor carried over to settings where the mother was *not* bilingual, with Torsh reporting not only these mothers' "frustration with their inability to support their children's bi/multilingualism" in these situations, but also their common recourse to active strategies such as encouraging their bilingual partners or in-laws to continue speaking in their minority language to the couple's child (Torsh 2020, 103). That the work of language and bilingual parenting often falls to women in heterosexual couplings reflects the way general cultural maintenance and "kinwork" (the maintenance of kin ties and relations) have historically been, and continue to be, gendered (Torsh 2020, 104; di Leonardo 1987). In the case of language specifically, this gendering also flows from the deep associations of language (*la langue*) with the feminine (Ewgen 2016; Stone 2012), and the often-idealized evocations of originariness, home, intimacy, and nourishment in the so called "*mother tongue*." But further compounding the gendered division of labor in the case of language maintenance is the privatization of this work. In an environment that actively devalues the language-worlds of racialized migrants, the labor of language maintenance becomes privatized and often also domesticated. While not the same, Eva Kittay's analysis in her iconic feminist text, *Love's Labour*—to which the subtitle of this section references—draws an important connection between the

systematic devaluing and deprioritizing of care work by our social institutions, and the gendered privatization of its labor (Kittay 1999, 137). In the case of language, we might also follow Kittay's lead in asking after the implications of this gendered and racialized labor for broader questions for justice, equality, and the ability of certain groups to meaningfully participate in social life.

4. The Intergenerational Co-creation of Language-Worlds

I read that beauty has historically demanded replication. We make more of anything we find aesthetically pleasing, whether it's a vase, a painting, a chalice, a poem. We reproduce it in order to keep it, extend it through space and time. ...It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus – the curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more. I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worth of replication. And so what? So what if all I ever made of my life was more of it?

—*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, OCEAN VUONG

The undecidability of woman's identity is played out in this mother-daughter bond. Daughters become mothers, and mothers remember themselves as daughters that blurs the stability of distinction. When a woman gives birth she does so to a child, yet in another sense also to her self.

—*Philosophy and the Maternal Body*, MICHELLE BOULOUS

WALKER

What I have so far called the “labor” of language and of bilingual parenting might also be called an honoring, paying homage, or reclamation. In her article, Banerjee recounts one fateful January day where, exhausted and exasperated from trying to calm an unsettled newborn, she spontaneously switches to Bengali: “For the first time, I stopped feeling like a phoney. I felt as if I were speaking the right language” (Banerjee 2017). For her, despite the many challenges and worries that mark the experience of bilingual parenting, there is also something deeply important and meaningful about this undertaking. As she writes, “it is as if, when the Bengali words come out of my mouth and hit my daughter's consciousness, I give

her access to a fundamental part of myself and to my history” (2017). Banerjee paints a picture of her youth, growing up in a white working-class area in west London, where encounters with casual racism and skinheads were never far away, but where too, her community still found ways to live, laugh, and come together. Language, she writes, carries the special ability to capture this:

The language is like an invisible aural cradle, carrying the stories, memories and feelings that embody my sense of who I am. It carries all the chatter and the tenor of the life we had at home, of the Bengali gatherings in damp community halls all over London. (Banerjee 2017)

What is honored in Banerjee’s effort to parent in Bengali, then, are the histories of migration, memories of the old country, and experiences of displacement and racism in the new—an honoring that recognizes the labor, struggle, and hard-won victories that her fore-mothers and -fathers endured. Similarly, Liao in her own efforts to reacquaint herself with Cantonese (moving past the adolescent frustration with her parents’ stalled English) pays homage to her family and community’s migrant experience through her undertaking. More than these personal, familial, and collective histories, what is also honored in the endeavor of bilingual parenting (or language reclamation) is a deep part of oneself that can, as we have seen, evoke powerful feelings of shame, ambivalence, disorientation, and grief. Against this background of alienation, bilingual parenting can serve as one way of reclaiming and reaffirming a language-world and linguistic identity, of recognizing its beauty as worthy not just of replication as Vuong writes, but more—of regeneration. It can, echoing Stebbins, be its own kind of quiet yet defiant resistance. Moreover, I would argue that such homage and resistance is not purely recursive but also futural in its co-creating of language and language-worlds.

For those of us second- and subsequent-generation migrants, attempting to parent in the “mother tongue” (or to mother in the “mother tongue,” as the case may be) presents all sorts of challenges and conundrums. For some, it is a question of reconnecting our tongues with a language deliberately pushed away, having to negotiate a new relationship with it, to search out new ways to have it fit in our mouths, and new ways to inhabit this language-world. For others, the effort to parent bilingually brings to the

fore the limit of our own language, in which we are often—echoing Lahiri’s own tenuous grasp of Bengali—lingual but not literate, and adequately proficient but maybe only to the extent of a primary- or high-schooler. How, then, do we parent in this language? Moreover, how do we parent in the way we want to parent? As Banerjee writes:

My own Bengali, though fluent, didn’t really progress from when I was about 14, my vocabulary limited to what I learned from my parents. How will I communicate with my daughter using complex words, discuss grownup emotions? I fast forward to when she is an adult. Maybe we will be having a glass of wine together, having a laugh, maybe talking about her latest relationship—I don’t, for example, know the word for “flirting,” the phrase for “fancying” someone. Will I always be looking for the right words? Should I just give up and accept that the sea of Englishness around me is my life? (Banerjee 2017)

Like Liao, I also have several language and translation apps on my phone and consult them semiregularly to find words missing in my Cantonese vocabulary—only I search them out not to communicate with my parents but with my children. For example, like many heritage speakers, I too had to look up the Cantonese anatomical names for different genitals, having only been exposed to their euphemisms growing up (a phenomenon that speaks not only to generational but also cultural priorities when it comes to parenting philosophies). Social media groups for bilingual parents are often replete with queries and suggestions for translations of phrases that parents themselves were not parented with—usually (but not always) phrases expressing empathy, encouragement, and emotional connection in one’s maternal language. Again, there is work in this, but so too is there joy, and an opening for a something new. Here are parents, who in the course of parenting the way they wish to, search out new language—not just new vocabularies or vernaculars but something more: the opportunity to forge a new relationship with language, a new way of being in and with their “mother tongue.” If language in its Heideggerian conception offers us a kind of home, then what bilingual parenting in this diasporic, alienated, “in-between” context might suggest is a different kind of linguistic dwelling—one more attuned to Ortega’s account of “hometactics,” which she describes as the practice of carving out “a sense of familiarity in the

midst of an environment or world in which one cannot fully belong.”⁶⁸ And if, as I have argued elsewhere, dwelling is understood not as a passive being-in-place but as a porous “coming and going,”⁶⁹ then bilingual parenting reflects this insofar as it is an active feeling out of new ways to inhabit language and language-worlds in ways that embrace the home’s provisionality and perpetual unfinish.

For this reason I argue we understand bilingual parenting poorly if we view it primarily as a form of “intergenerational language *transmission*,” as is sometimes the case in sociological studies.⁷⁰ While language learning undoubtedly passes downward from parent to child, so too is there a movement back upward. A parent’s horizons—linguistic and social—are changed, and the world opens up to them in a way unlike before. Visiting the local bakery with my (now) children and chatting with them at the checkout counter leads the cashier to switch to Cantonese and to engage with us differently, making conversation with my children and recommendations to myself. Greeting my children in Cantonese upon child care pickup prompts educators to switch tongues and tell me about my children’s day in Cantonese. The world unfolds before me, the parent, in different ways, providing me with new interactions and openings. In doing so, it offers me the opportunity to inhabit this language differently, to reclaim a language I once felt not very at home in, to feel out a different relation to it, and to find a new place in it. If the birth of a child can also be said to herald the birth of a mother—and father, and grandparents, aunts, uncles, and so on—“all of these selves born together all at once,”⁷¹ then so too can parenting a child in one’s “mother tongue” occasion such linguistic births and rebirths. This is what I call the intergenerational co-creation of language-worlds; not only is a child’s linguistic world broadened and changed, but so too the parent’s. Bilingual parenting, in the case of the diasporic heritage speaker, sees lines of flight in multiple directions, traveling back up, expanding and reconfiguring language-worlds anew.

Conclusion

Both Derrida and Cassin offer some rich provocation, when they insist that language does not belong to us in some proprietary sense, but rather we to it. So too, does Heidegger with his invocation of language as home and dwelling, and Arendt, the “mother tongue” as a place of intimacy

and origination—a place for which there is no true replacement. And yet as I have explored at length in this article, a more complicated relation to language and home—and language *as* home—emerges when we attend to the experiences and affects of the bilingual heritage speaker who occupies the social location of a racialized, migrant-outsider. As richly explored by Anzaldúa, Banerjee, Lahiri, Vuong, and Liao, our relation to the “mother tongue” is one laced with ambivalence; it is one of intimacy and identification but also estrangement and alienation, of deep joy and familiarity but equally frustration, shame, and loss. We might belong to a maternal language in some sense, and remain or dwell in its “house,” but this dwelling and belonging is often imperfect, liminal, and uneasy. Moreover, for the bilingual heritage speaker and parent, there is a relentless disorientation and navigating between language-worlds, and a social, mental, and emotional labor that is both necessary but unacknowledged. Set against an understanding of language as more than communicative and culturally important—but as something with world-revealing and world-having potentialities—this exploration of the liminality of language for the heritage speaker begins to suggest a deeper, ontological significance. At the same time, what the experiences of the diasporic bilingual show us is that though one’s dwelling in language and the “mother tongue” is rarely seamless, there remains always a generative opening, with the example of bilingual parenting reminding us how we constantly negotiate, rewrite, and co-create our belonging to languages and the homes they make possible.

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NOTES

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1. Six years on, at the time of publication.
2. I use the cisgendered terms “pregnant women and new mothers” here as this is to whom the literature (including the references cited) typically refers; however, I assume that all pregnant people and new birth parents would experience some variation of this phenomenon. On the importance of linguistic inclusiveness for transgender and nonbinary patients in the field of “women’s health,” see Daphna Stroumsa and Justine Wu, “Welcoming Transgender and Nonbinary Patients: Expanding the Language of ‘Women’s Health,’” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 219 (6) (2018): 585.e1–585.e5.
3. Elseline Hoekzema et al., “Pregnancy Leads to Long-Lasting Changes in Human Brain Structure,” *Nature Neuroscience* 20 (2017): 287–96; Sasha Davies, “Cognitive Impairment During Pregnancy: A Meta-analysis,” *The Medical Journal of Australia* 208 (1) (2018): 35–40.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 183.
5. I use the gendered term “mother tongue” throughout this article in order to connect with its common usage in our vernacular and to note the often-gendered dimension of language work; however, I do so in parenthesis so as to acknowledge the problematic tendency to naturalize language’s connection to the feminine and maternal.
6. There is controversy—linguistic and political—around the common reference to Cantonese as a “dialect” of Chinese as opposed to a (regional) language in its own right. I have opted in this article for a more neutral description of Cantonese and Hokkien as “branches” of Chinese rather than “dialects,” given they are not mutually intelligible, and given the complex political histories at play. For a thorough discussion of this, see Gina Anne Tam’s analysis in *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
7. I speak of bilingualism throughout this article but at times it would be more accurate to speak of *multilingualism*, since it is often the case that the migrant communities I refer to move across multiple languages and adopt new ones as a matter of survival. For the sake of readability, I will largely refer to “bilingualism” throughout this article, but in doing so I do not wish to diminish the linguistic agility or sophistication of these communities.
8. George Yancy, “The Black Body: A Phenomenology of Being Stopped,” in *Race as Phenomena*, ed. Emily Lee (Albany: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 143–74; Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

9. Lori Gallegos, "Conflicts of Home-Making: Strategies of Survival and the Politics of Assimilation," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 40 (2) (2019): 225–38; Rónke Òké, "Traveling Elsewhere: Afropolitanism, *Americanah*, and the Illocution of Travel," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7 (2) (2019): 289–305.
10. Charles Mills, "The Chronopolitics of Racial Time," *Time & Society* 29 (2) (2020): 297–317; Alia Al-Saji, "Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past," *Insights* 6 (5) (2013): 1–13.
11. Lori Gallegos, "The Interpreter's Dilemma: On the Moral Burden of Consensual Heteronomy," in *Latin American Immigration Ethics*, ed. A. Reed-Sandoval and L. R. Díaz Cepeda (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022), chap. 10. <https://openre-searchlibrary.org/content/ab78c045-3f7d-4a62-919a-459e1d455eb6>
12. This broadly parallels John Drabinski's argument about the ontological (not only aesthetic or political) significance of James Baldwin's account of "black English," although his argument there differs insofar as it concerns vernacular speech. In advancing this claim, Drabinski also points to Heidegger's iconic reference to language as "the house of Being." J. E. Drabinski, "Vernaculars of Home," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 3 (2) (2015): 203–26.
13. One of problems with the term "mother tongue" is that it can operate heteronormatively, not only in its assuming language and socialization as women's work and the domain of mothering (as opposed to law-giving as the domain of the father), but also in its heteronormative assumption that we have only one mother, or that we have a mother at all.
14. To this end, the special-themed cluster "The Myths of Maternity," published in *Hypatia* 2012 (edited by Linda Martín Alcoff) offers some interesting insights into the numerous ways maternity as a practice and as a concept have been mythologized and mischaracterized throughout the history of philosophy. Linda M. Alcoff, "The Myths of Maternity—Editor's Introduction," *Hypatia* 27 (1) (2012): 75.
15. Barbara Cassin, "More Than One Language," *e-flux Journal* (2017): 76, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100018/more-than-one-language/>
16. H. Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013), 21–22.
17. *Ibid.*, 22. It is important to note that Arendt's bilingualism, and her point of reference for comments around the "mother tongue," differ from the situation of thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa (born in south Texas), and then again from the "heritage speakers" whom I refer to in this article. According to Rosen, Arendt had "little facility in English" upon arrival in the United States in 1941 (at the age of thirty-five) and had arranged for some intensive English study, and so she came to English later in life. Alan Rosen, *Sounds of Defiance: The Holocaust, Multilingualism, and the Problem of English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 105.

I further note that within the field of linguistics distinctions are often made between types of bilingualism in order to delineate the conditions under which a person acquired their language proficiency, e.g., coordinate, compound, and subcoordinate bilingualism. However, some have argued that such distinctions have outlived their usefulness. See, for example, Karl Diller, "Compound'

- and ‘Coordinate’ Bilingualism: A Conceptual Artifact,” *Word* 26 (2) (1970): 254–61; Douglas Shaffer, “Is Bilingualism Compound or Coordinate?” *Lingua* 40 (1) (1976): 69–77.
18. This minimal conception of home as the place from which we begin and the place to which we return is something I explore in *The Habits of Racism* (Ngo 2017, 97–105).
 19. Jennifer Gaffney, “Can a Language Go Mad? Arendt, Derrida, and the Political Significance of the Mother Tongue,” *Philosophy Today* 59 (3) (2015): 527.
 20. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, trans. D. Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008). The original German reads “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer Behausung wohnt der Mensch.” *Brief Über Den Humanismus* 145. Heidegger also writes in his 1957/58 essay “The Nature of Language”: “Therefore This Statement Holds True: Language Is the House of Being.” Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 63.
 21. Heidegger 1982, 112.
 22. Heidegger 2008, 230. In “The Nature of Language” Heidegger similarly writes: “*The essential being of language is Saying as Showing*” (1982, 123; emphasis in the original).
 23. Heidegger 1982, 230.
 24. *Ibid.*, 119.
 25. For a discussion of this in relation to nonhuman animals, see William McNeill, “Life Beyond the Organism: Animal Being in Heidegger’s Freiburg Lectures, 1929–30,” in *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*, ed. Peter Steeves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 197–248. Others have also argued that such a claim misunderstands and/or underestimates the inner world of nonverbal humans and prelinguistic children. Megan Craig, for example, writes:

“Philosophers often describe language as the threshold to rationality. Animals are routinely denied rationality in the grand and paternal tradition of Western Philosophy—Descartes says they are without souls; Heidegger describes them as “world poor.” Often children are grouped together with animals among the irrational, emotional, speechless beings of the world. This has seemed deeply problematic to me for a long time, but now that I am seeing you [her infant daughter] press toward language, on the verge of your first words, I am more acutely aware of the poverty of words and the richness of your preverbal expressions.” Megan Craig, “Cora’s World,” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 10 (2) (2011): 2.
 26. There are also deeper implications for this still, for if language is as active as Heidegger claims, then per Derrida (with Donatella di Cesare elaborating years later) then the German language really did “go mad.” As Gaffney elaborates:

In light of this, Di Cesare argues that in her commitment to her mother tongue, Arendt fails to appreciate the deeper implications of Heidegger’s conception of language. Derrida, by contrast, shows through his criticism of Arendt that if language is as close to us as Heidegger suggests, then the German language,

the very language in which Arendt feels most at home, must have had a hand in the insanity of Nazi Germany. Therefore, Di Cesare says:

Starting from Heidegger, but in order to set out in a completely different direction, Derrida turns Arendt's sentence upside down. It is really the German language that has gone insane . . . The insanity articulates itself linguistically, it occurs in and within language, with and within the mother tongue." (Gaffney 2015, 529)

27. The full passage reads as follows: "Language is much more like a sort of being than a means, and that is why it can present something to us so well. A friend's speech over the telephone brings us the friend himself, as if he were wholly present in that manner of calling and saying goodbye to us . . . Because meaning is the total movement of speech, our thought crawls along in language." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 80.
28. *Ibid.*, 78.
29. *Ibid.*, 76.
30. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 38.
33. Cassin 2017.
34. While I mention them together here, I do want to acknowledge significant differences in their views on language and the mother tongue, as Gaffney (2015) outlines in her article, and as indicated in note 26. For an insightful reading of Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, see also Rey Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," *New Literary History* 39 (2) (2008): 217–31.
35. I thank Flavia Bertolotti Townsend and Andres Townsend for their guidance with this translation.
36. I use the term "language-worlds" in order to invoke Lugones's own term, "world"-traveling, although without the parenthesis she insists on. As Lugones clarifies in relation to her invocation of "world": "For something to be a 'world' in my sense it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people," although it can also be inhabited by "some imaginary people . . . [or] people who are dead," too. María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2 (1987): 9–10. Importantly, though, "world" in her sense is not a utopia, meaning it is not a place that exists solely in imagination or possibility but is instead one that has a fleshy existence. My reference to language-world, then, similarly evokes languages as they are inhabited, which is to say as they exist in the messy, mixed, imperfect, variegated ways that people and language communities also exist. Setting aside the question of whether it is possible for a language to truly exist if it no longer has any speakers, what I mean to invoke with the term "language-world"

is something more than a language-system unto itself, but rather language as it is lived, spoken, heard, modulated, stretched, and so forth.

37. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2020), 327.
38. This is evocatively referenced in Fanon's example of the newly arrived Martinican's futile attempt to roll his Rs: "*Garrçon! Un vè de biè* (in place of *Un verre de bière* / a glass of beer)." Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions Points, 1952), 16; J. E. Drabinski, "Vernaculars of Home," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 3 (2) (2015): 203–26.
39. Lori Gallegos, "The Interpreter's Dilemma: On the Moral Burden of Consensual Heteronomy," in *Latin American Immigration Ethics*, ed. A. Reed-Sandoval and L. R. Díaz Cepeda (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022), 258.
40. Joseph Lo Bianco and Yvette Slaughter, "Bilingual Education in Australia," in *Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, ed. Ofelia García et al. (Cham: Springer, 2017), 348.
41. Shannon Sullivan, "White World-Traveling," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18 (4) (2004): 300–304. And there is undoubtedly a class dimension to this too, with class differences themselves having a racialized dimension.
42. Lugones, for example, talks about how her Spanish affords her a playfulness that disappears when she lives in an English-language world (Lugones 1987).
43. And even these require additional effort for the Cantonese speaker, given most language aides default to Mandarin, as Liao notes, and given many who speak Cantonese (which is also diglossic), in an intergenerational migrant context, are not often literate in its written script.
44. Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 19.
45. *Ibid.*, 21.
46. Vuong 2019b, 1.
47. Vuong 2019a.
48. For example, it is open to argument as to whether Vuong's reference to the inherent "failure" of his project is a failure of language in the mode of communication (as a bridge), or whether it is a failure of language as a means of world-sharing or shared world-having, or perhaps both.
49. Derrida 1998, 1.
50. Heidegger 1982, 63.
51. I deliberately include both traditional Chinese characters (more commonly used among Cantonese speakers than simplified characters) and its Jyutping romanization here alongside the English translation in order to illustrate how laborious written Cantonese can be for heritage speakers to navigate, since many heritage speakers in English-dominant societies are not literate in Chinese script (traditional or simplified) or formally acquainted with its romanization systems (Jyutping or Yale) but rather learn the language orally and aurally.
52. Tonya Stebbins et al., *Living Languages and New Approaches to Language Revitalisation Research* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.

53. For example, American Indigenous (Luiseño and Cupeño) philosopher Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner has questioned whether language revitalization and reclamation projects can sometimes unwittingly reinscribe settler colonial logics via trauma narratives, which invariably describe Indigenous languages as “dying, ill, or sickly” (2018, 271). She further writes:
- “This trauma narrative pathologizes Indigenous peoples as psychologically wounded and in need of support from outside, development-oriented agencies. These trauma narratives allow for the common arguments that the lack of language fluency is a problem because of the ‘lack of will’ of Indigenous youth or because of intergenerational shame. These arguments, when promoted by non-Indigenous organizations, inscribe neoliberal arenas as healers and solution-makers, rather than as agents in the system that attempts linguicide. This re-focusing centers Indigenous communities as the cause of language disparities and depicts them as fraught with trauma that needs to be healed, rather than focusing on tribal sovereignty and self-determination” Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner, “The Moral Fabric of Linguicide: Un-weaving Trauma Narratives and Dependency Relationships in Indigenous Language Reclamation,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 14 (2) (2018): 266–76, 272.
54. Sheela Banerjee, “How Should I Talk to My Daughter?” *Guardian*, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/dec/23/bilingual-english-bengali-childre-n-speak-two-languages>
55. For Anzaldúa, sometimes it is an in-between, and sometimes there is a concurrency. To some extent, I think this reflects Ortega’s discussion of a tension within Anzaldúa’s work on the question of being’s oneness or multiplicity. Mariana Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016), 39–46.
56. *Ibid.*, 66.
57. Anzaldúa cited in Ortega 2016, 63; emphasis mine.
58. I use the term “stack” here not in the sense of a neat separation and arrangement but rather to invoke its etymological sense of “piling” or “heaping” together.
59. For an example of this, see Odilia Yim and Richard Clément, “‘You’re a Juking’: Examining Cantonese–English Code-Switching as an Index of Identity,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 38 (4) (2019): 479–95.
60. Banerjee’s example above shows some traces of this cross-linguistic transfer on her own part, though the phenomenon is often stronger still in those at an earlier stage of language development, such as in young children or newer language-learners. My children, for example, habitually invert the Cantonese phrasing of *baa1baa1 hai2 bin1 dou6?* (爸爸喺邊度? [Where is Dad?]), with its subject-verb-adverb syntax, opting for a more syntactically English *bin1 dou6 hai6 baa1baa1?* (邊度係爸爸?), whose adverb-verb-subject structure would deliver the equivalent of “Dad is where?”
61. For some examples illustrating broader public and political discourse around the failure of new migrants to sufficiently adapt to English, see: “New Migrants Living in ‘Cultural Bubbles’ Need to Improve Their English Skills, Government Warns,”

ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-07/english-language-tests-need-to-be-tougher-government-warns/9522412>; <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/may/20/dutton-refugee-remarks-uncertain-reception-multicultural-marginals>; “Peter Dutton Says ‘Illiterate and Innumerate’ Refugees Would Take Australian Jobs,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/peter-dutton-says-illiterate-and-innumerate-refugees-would-take-australian-jobs-20160517-goxhjr.html>

62. An anecdote from my brother illustrates this sentiment amply: At a formal dinner where he presented findings from his research scholarship, my brother was seated beside a middle-aged white male philanthropist who, after some small talk, asked with a smirk:

“Now tell me, Steven, do your parents speak English?”

“No, they don’t speak English, they speak Vietnamese and Chinese.”

“So, how do you communicate with them?”

“I speak Chinese to them.”

“Ah so there’s the problem! what you’re supposed to do is to only speak to them in English and only respond to them when they speak in English so that way it forces them to learn the language!”

Quite apart from grossly undervaluing my parents’ linguistic abilities—they speak at least five languages or language branches each, they just don’t happen to speak English very well—this man’s “advice” also shows the infantilization often meted out to racialized migrants. In this man’s visioning, my brother—the child—ought to have been using parental tactics on my parents in order to *teach them*, never mind that it is *their* linguistic capacities that made his bilingualism possible.

63. It is noteworthy that this language brokering is usually navigated by children in particular, and one with both burdens and benefits. As Gallegos argues, “Also understated is how these children are actually providing an important social service when they do this, stepping in for the gaps left by people who are not multilingual or who are not equipped to deal with non-English speakers” (Gallegos 2022, 247).
64. Gallegos 2022, 245.
65. For an example of this, see “Sami Shah Says the ABC Sent Him to a Speech Therapist,” *The Age*, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/sami-shah-says-the-abc-sent-him-to-a-speech-therapist-20180716-p4zrp4.html>
66. Distinguished Professor of Applied Linguistics, Ingrid Piller, once publicly referred to Australia as a “graveyard for languages” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-30/language-loss-and-revival-australia-tongue-tied-and-fluent/11736450>). Such a claim can be better understood in the context of Australia’s history of language decimation across Aboriginal communities, as well as its concerted efforts to restrict non-European migrant languages. For example, Hanna Torsh writes:

The second key period of nation-building was the establishment of the White Australia Policy in 1901 and the Immigration Restriction Act of the same year which curtailed the “flowering of linguistic and cultural diversity” (Smolicz and Secombe 2003) resulting from the immigration mix of the time.

The Immigration Restriction Act made [the failure to pass] a dictation test in a European language other than English the means by which the state could designate a person a “prohibited immigrant” (Clark 1963). Furthermore, in the period during World War I, legislation was passed which outlawed second language medium schooling.” Hanna Irving Torsh, *Linguistic Inter marriage in Australia: Between Pride and Shame* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7.

67. See, for example, podcast series, *Tongue Tied and Fluent*, a five-part series aired on *ABC Radio National* in 2019, and also SBS podcast series, *My Bilingual Family*, a six-part series that aired in 2022, both of which explore the work and challenges of parenting bilingually; <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/features/tongue-tied-and-fluent/> and <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/podcast/my-bilingual-family>
68. Mariana Ortega, “Hometactics: Self-Mapping, Belonging, and the Home Question,” in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily Lee (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 182. Interestingly, in her exploration of the Chicana notion of *rasquachismo* as an example of Ortega’s hometactics, Gallegos describes the practice in terms that resonate strikingly with Vuong’s passage in the epigraph to the section: “I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication.” Gallegos writes of the Rasquache aesthetic sensibility: “In rejecting those norms, however, it also conveys a potentially political message by insisting on the beauty or value of what—or perhaps who—would otherwise be considered too crappy to keep” (Gallegos 2019, 229–30).
69. Ngo 2017, 112–13.
70. See, for example, Helen Borland, “Intergenerational Language Transmission in an Established Australian Migrant Community: What Makes the Difference?” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 180 (1) (2006): 23–41.
71. Megan Craig, “Cora’s World,” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 10 (2) (2011): 3.

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